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ABSTRACT

A classroom research project investigated whether having students tell their own stories about learning might provide a mode and a context for self-assessment of their formal work in relation to their experience and growth as learners. Two courses involving sustained reading of major segments of the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament taught at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a transition course for transfer students at Alverno College in Wisconsin were refocused from teacher assessment of students' products to student self-assessment, understood as both process and product. Students were asked to: (1) tell an initial story about an experience of learning; (2) provide vignettes of their experiences in preparing assessments or exercises in the course; (3) tell their stories as learners based on these materials and other experiences; and (4) compare their own stories as learners with either the film "Educating Rita" or the novel "The Chosen." The teachers of these courses found time and again that what the students said in their own words was compelling. Many of the students' stories showed that what they learned about was learning about themselves as learners, in different disciplinary or curricular contexts. As students came to reflect on and assess their learning strategies, the teachers found themselves challenged to do the same as teachers. (A figure representing the connectionism, dynamism, and interaction of the project is included; 19 references and examples of each of the 4 types of student-generated stories are attached.) (RS)

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No. 71 Summer 1992

Teaching-Learning Issues

ED 351 675

Narrative, Self-Assessment, and Reflective Learners and Teachers

CS 213505

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This number of *Teaching-Learning Issues* was prepared by Mary Kay Kramp, Associate Professor of Arts and Humanities at Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and W. Lee Humphreys, Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Learning Research Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. They wish to express their gratitude to the National Center on Adult Learning, and especially its Director, Dr. Timothy Lehmann, and its Advisory Council, for their many forms of support in the first phase of the project reported upon in this *T-LI*.

You cannot teach a man anything;
you can only help him to find it
within himself.

Galileo

Learning Research Center
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Some time ago we took part in a workshop on college teaching in which the presenters began with an invitation to participants to tell each other stories about experiences of teaching. We found telling our stories and sharing stories with colleagues produced a remarkably fresh and personalized awareness of the experience of being a teacher. It created an enriched context for reflecting on what it means to be a college teacher.

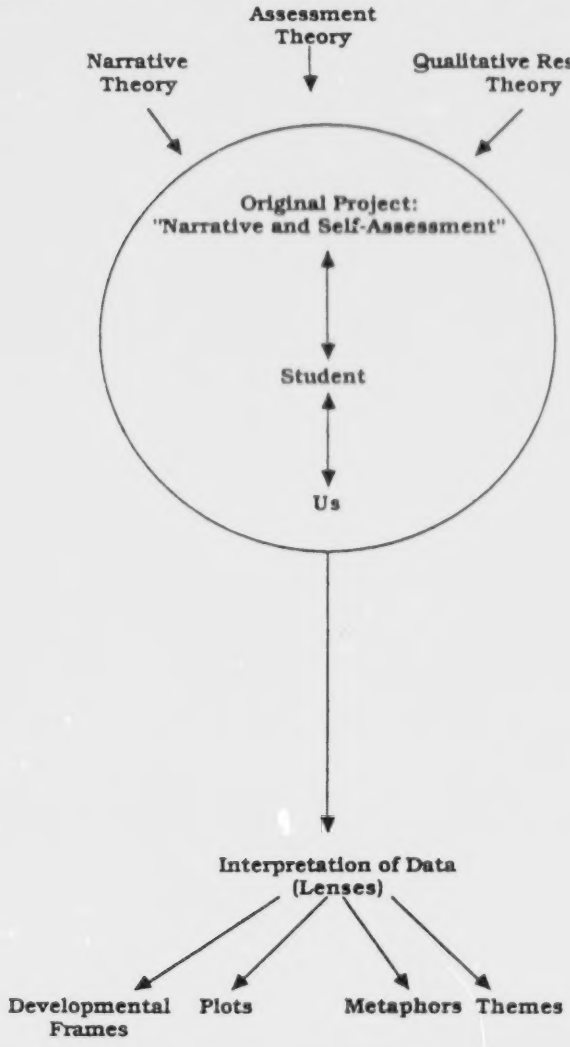
This experience led us to wonder what would happen if we extended this invitation to our students—if we invited their stories of learning and of themselves as learners in the contexts of our courses. Being aware of the power of narrative as a formative way by which humans make experience meaningful, we were also aware that students often tell us their stories in times and places less formal than the classroom—the hallways, our offices, over coffee, in chance meetings. What if we planned specific time and space in our classrooms for their stories? Our hunch and hope was that their stories of learning would allow them to make meaningful their experiences of learning, not only for themselves, but for others as well. Might narrative provide a mode and a context for self-assessment of their formal work in these courses in relation to their experience and growth as learners?

This question seemed an ideal basis for a practitioner or classroom research project. Only our students could tell their stories. On the other hand, only we as classroom teachers could give them permission in this context to engage in this activity. This also seemed an ideal project for collaboration between two classroom teachers, and especially two who teach in distinct institutional and curricular contexts. Telling or reading stories is enriched when shared. Tellers need an audience, of course, but shared reading/listening to and reflection on stories enlarges interpretative

possibilities, allowing deeper and more nuanced understanding. Telling, hearing, and reading stories are not private activities.

In retrospect, the project as conceptualized and planned took a shape that highlights connection, dynamism, and interaction. Figure One represents this visually.

Figure 1



At the heart of the project are the teacher and student in the classroom and in extensions of those classrooms. Large bodies of research and numerous writings exploring various theories of narrative, assessment, and qualitative research inform and influence our work. The theoretical framework of this project became more visible as the project evolved. Rather than simply move from theory to practice, we sought constantly to move back and forth between theoretical reflection and experience in the classroom, and each became a context for reviewing the other.

As theories of narrative, assessment, and qualitative research affect our doing of the project, interpretative lenses provided ways for us to read and listen to our students' stories, and also provided ways for us to talk about what we were reading and hearing. We did not determine these lenses before we began. Rather, they emerged. Hearing students' stories as they created them allowed us to be aware of their language choices. This gave us clues to metaphors implicit as well as explicit in their stories. Such lenses provide us ways of thinking about what we read and hear that deepen our own understanding of such stories in our on-going dialogue. Early on we found our interpretation of students' stories informed by developmental theories (Perry, 1970; Kegan, 1982; Belenky and colleagues, 1986). We found our use of these interpretative lenses to be in the spirit of what William G. Perry suggests is especially valuable for teachers about this sort of description of human development: "(If descriptions are to) have a value to you as an educator, it is precisely in the opportunity offered to tune your ear—to discriminate more finely among the themes and variations in students' voices that tell you of the worlds from which they speak. In so hearing, you may more readily make what you want them to learn both accessible and challenging" (quoted in Mentkowski, Moser, Strait, 1983, p. ii).

Thus our attempts to understand the students' stories are always tentative and open to other encounters with these students. These stories primarily served to enrich our interactions with them, especially our responses to their work and their experience in doing it. In this we sought a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what these students told us. We avoided categorizing or labeling, and did not seek to clump students or stories into groups or types. Out interests remain more descriptive than predictive.

Narrative and Self-Assessment

We perceive self-assessment to be a multidimensional activity in which students observe and judge their own performances. It is learning at its fullest. Students develop a facility for self-assessment

much like they develop any other ability—through practice in various contexts, at varying levels of complexity, and with increasingly greater effectiveness and independence.

Students traditionally make use of a variety of modes of self-assessment, most of which center attention on a product rather than on the process that leads to the product. We have used such modes and found them effective. Our goal in this project was to expand the range of such modes because of our belief that the product is the result of a lived process. We are interested in that process as well, not only as it is observed by others, but especially as the student experiences it. Present modes of self-assessment involve students in assessing their products; they do not necessarily encourage or even allow students to tell of their experiences in and of learning. The products or "works" must speak for the person, and a danger in present modes of self-assessment is that the voices of the students, who alone can tell us of their experiences in producing a product, will be silenced as the work becomes the object of study. We sought ways to empower our students by creating in our courses the time and space necessary for them to tell of their experiences and to gather these narratives of their experiences into an enriched process of self-assessment that relates their doing of the work to the work done.

Only our students can tell us about what they experience. Narratives or stories provide an especially apt medium for this. As Madeleine R. Grumet suggests in reflecting on an essay by Joan Didion, stories fill the space between "what happened" and "what it means to me" (1988, p. 66). Narrative can augment other modes of self-assessment, providing our students an enlarged perspective on their work by allowing students to see it as the result of a process, of activities, of effort expended. As Connelly and Clandinin state, "narrative and life go together, and so the principal attraction of narrative as a method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (1990, p. 10).

At heart, narrative requires simply the recounting of an event or sequence of events. Yet as experienced by both teller and audience, narratives have certain special characteristics that provide a basis for enriched and deepened experiences in learning and in self-assessment. Narrative is uniquely built upon the particular. It is personal, and serves as a powerful mode by which human beings discover meaning in, as well as shape as meaningful, their experience. Narrative does not simply report what is already known, meanings already constructed. It is the medium through which we come to know, through which meanings are made (Sarbin, 1985;

Bruner, 1986; Carr, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). The phrase "to tell a story" can mislead, for the telling is not simply a reporting of something that already exists. Each telling creates something new. In the act of "telling" we make or shape stories; in telling our own stories we shape and reshape ourselves (Booth, 1988; Alter, 1989; Coles, 1989; Witherell and Noddings, 1991).

Narrative centers on change, development, growth. Narrative re-presents, revives, makes present past experience, in ways that shape future experience. Wendy Martin states in the introduction to her book with the revealing title *We Are the Stories we Tell:* "To articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perception, is always empowering and liberating" (1990, p. 9). Narratives about experiences uniquely privilege their narrators in that only they can give voice and shape to what is their experience. If we empower our students to tell us their stories of learning, then we as instructors can, in Robert Coles' words, "learn the lesson a good instructor learns only when he (we would add "she") becomes a willing student eager to be taught" (1989, p. 22). Only our students can tell/teach us about their experiences as learners.

In most self-assessment what typically happens is that students focus on their performances, their work, their products. Students evaluate their achievements. A particular effect of narrative as a mode of assessment is that it permits, and even compels students to consider and include their experiences of doing the work as well as the work itself, "performance" as activity as well as product. This mode of self-assessment then relates process and product. Narrative assists students to come to know better how they did what they did.

What We Did: The Courses

While coming to this understanding of self-assessment and narrative, we turned our attention to transforming specific courses each of us would teach in 1990-1991 to allow time and space for students to tell stories of their learning. We sought to do this in a manner that would not add greatly to the amount of work demanded of students or instructors. The intent was to move the focus from our assessment of their products to their self-assessment of their performances, understood as both process and product. The goal was to empower them to assume direction of their learning, to connect learning in our courses with experiences prior to and outside of these courses, and especially to shape future directions for their learning. An overview of these courses follows.

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The courses we designed for W. Lee Humphreys involved sustained reading and interpretation of major segments of the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament. The fall course approached the material from literary perspectives, asking questions that those who study literature ask of texts, employing both standard and some newer modes of literary analysis and interpretation. The first part was designed to use these literary approaches to interpret selected Hebrew narratives. The second part considered both selected biblical texts and later interpretative rereading of them (Genesis 1-2 and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, Hannah Mather Crocker's "On the Real Rights of Women"; The Book of Job and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*; Judges 13-16 and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*). Ways readers shape meanings in engagements with texts and how different readers and interpretative communities reflect distinct values and perspectives in their reading received particular attention.

The spring course approached the texts from historical perspectives, attempting to reconstruct the development of Hebraic religious traditions from their origins to the second century of the common era. Students asked of the material the sort of questions that historians ask of texts—purpose, perspective, bias, whose good is served, extent and limits on what they can tell us—and considered issues related to change over time as well as the relationship of changing religious or ideological perspectives to political, cultural, social, economic, and related dimensions of the life of a nation and people. Among other things students were asked to reconstruct contexts out of which specific texts seem to come, to exercise the imagination needed to empathize with perspectives that seem foreign, to explore the values and perspectives that shape ways ancient and recent historians reconstruct the past, and to evaluate one point of view in relation to that of another.

Selected interpretative material supplemented readings of primary texts in each of these courses. Students completed six graded take-home and open-book exercises each semester. There were no in-class examinations and no comprehensive final. While set at the junior level, the courses generally attract from 35-50 students rather evenly spread across the sophomore, junior, and senior years. Usually the courses attract a few more women than men, and there are always several students older than those coming to college right out of high school.

For our project students were asked in the first week of each course to write a three page story telling of an event that was characteristic or typical of their experiences with the Bible to this point

in their lives. Then as each of the take-home exercises was turned in at a class meeting, about fifteen minutes of that session was set aside in which students were asked to write a paragraph or two telling about what seemed significant to them in what they experienced in producing that exercise. Toward the end of the term the students reviewed their first story and the several vignettes about their experiences with the graded exercises, and were then asked: "Tell the story of the person reflected therein." They then read Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, which tells of the developing relationship of two Jewish boys with their religious heritage, with each other, and with their families and communities. Finally, they compared their stories as learners with the story of either Danny Saunders of Reuven Malter, the two young men at the center of Potok's novel.

Alverno College

The course selected and designed for Mary Kay Kramp has a particular institutional purpose at Alverno College. It is the transition course for transfer students or students with prior formal learning experience who are new to the College. These students enroll in this course during their first semester. An interdisciplinary course, it facilitates their transition into a college curriculum that is ability based, that explicitly teaches and assesses for abilities, that requires students to do what it is they know because it is assumed that knowledge goes beyond mastery to application (for additional information on the Alverno educational program, see Alverno College Faculty, 1989).

The median age is 28, with a range from 18 to fifty plus. Alverno's students bring varied experiences of higher education. Some are direct transfers from liberal arts colleges or university programs; others are graduates of two- or three-year programs, such as those offered by nursing or technical colleges Others are women who have interrupted formal college education and now choose to return. Most bring responsibilities not characteristic of the recent high school graduate. Many work a 40 hour week in order to finance a private college education.

A goal of the course is to provide examples of frameworks that will assist these students to access their prior learning, formal or informal. Since they share no common knowledge base, the course is designed to let prior learning be a resource that enriches the learning experiences and activities that shape the course. Sample writings from thinkers, scholars and authors—Joan Didion, Frederick Douglass, Barbara Tuchman, Maya Angelou, Carol Gilligan, Stephen Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, Thomas Kuhn and

others—representing disciplines in humanities, behavioral sciences, and natural sciences serve as a content base. Within the contexts of these areas of study, students address concepts, questions, and issues that call for them to engage, practice, and demonstrate the eight abilities identified by the Alverno faculty as characterizing the liberal arts graduate: communications, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision making, social interaction, effective citizenship, global perspectives, and aesthetic responsiveness. The course immerses the students in a study and experience of the curriculum that will empower them to move into appropriate programs at the point where their prior learning permits them to do so (for additional information on this course see Deutsch, Kramp, and Roth, 1990).

Students used audio tapes for their project entries. The task was "to tell about . . . ." Entries were not to be written out and read. A goal was to capture on audio tape all the nuances of individual voice, especially those revealed in inflection and tone, and those pauses where an insight might be forthcoming, but for the present is left unsaid. There was no expectation that these would be refined. Spontaneity was desirable, as we wanted the student to speak, then to think and speak in response to what she was saying. There were three or four entries, depending on the semester, each focusing on a particular learning experience. The initial entry in each of the semesters asked students to tell about a significant learning experience. For the second entry we asked the students to tell "What stands out for you" after participating in an assessment for social interaction. The third entry asked them to tell "What stands out for you" in doing an assessment for valuing. Prior to the final entry we requested students not listen to prior entries. For the final entry the task was to listen to the entire tape and "Tell the story of the person on the tape." Having articulated their own stories, they were asked to compare their stories with that of Rita, the central character if the film *Educating Rita* which they had seen during one of the last classes.

The Process

In summary the research process we developed and adapted to each course involves the following four steps. Students were asked:

1. To tell an initial story about an experience of learning and/or with the subject matter of the course.

2. To provide vignettes of what stands out or is significant for them in their experiences in preparing assessments or exercises in the course throughout the term.

3. To tell their story as a learner based on these materials and other experiences during the term that are deemed significant by them.

4. To compare their stories as learners with either the film *Educating Rita* or the novel *The Chosen*.

This process asks for little additional course time and demands a minimum of additional effort by either students or instructor. It is adaptable to any course of any type and offered at any level in a full range of subjects. Yet, as suggested by the benefits we found it offered our students, its impact can be transformative.

Selected Students' Stories

Examples of these four sorts of materials received from two students are appended to this article. They simply illustrate what specific students told us in their initial stories, in their vignettes of what stood out for them in doing specific exercises or assessments, in telling their story of themselves as learners in that course, and in comparing and contrasting their story with that of another. We found time and again that what the students said in their own words was compelling. Their stories speak most effectively to the value of this process for them. For example, the chance to tell the story of themselves as learners over the course of the term led sometimes to striking integrative observations, effectively expressed by one student in the following way: "I didn't really notice it happening to me, until I kind of stepped back away from it, like the painting, you know, where you stand too close you just see the little dots, and once you back up, you go, 'Wow!' And you see the whole thing." Thus these examples are set out in full.

In the first case of a student who wrote her stories the texts are reproduced. In the case of the second student, who used audio tape, the text is a transcription, with minimal editing for clarity made necessary by the change in medium. In the latter it must be remembered that important qualities of voice such as tone and pace are lost on the printed page.

As we listened to and read what our students shared with us, we found that the different media invited and encouraged somewhat different qualities and responses. What stands out in our experiences of the students' voices on audio tapes is their ingenuousness. The very qualities of the human voice, especially communicating thought in process, convey emotions and moods that written words alone do not necessarily speak. The written responses, especially those done outside of class, often have an artful coherence that makes them eminently readable. One gets the sense

that tangential words and ideas have sometimes been edited out in the final revision, suggesting a conscious shaping of events to create a story.

Benefits for Students

At the outset we anticipated that narrative would provide students a uniquely powerful way for making connections, understanding contexts, and gaining power to act, depth of nuance, and awareness of possibility. The samples of the student narratives included reveal they did this—and more. We believe self-assessment to be a way of learning. Many of the students' stories show that what they learned about was learning, about themselves as learners, in different disciplinary or curricular contexts. Self-assessing in a narrative mode made it possible for them to "find their own voices to describe themselves and their competence." Students' stories, written/spoken for purposes of self-assessment, placed "the locus of control with the learner" to choose what to tell us (Justice and Marienau, 1988, p. 50). Here narrative, with its focus on the individual, especially contributes to the process of self-assessment. Feedback on the stories from the teacher was, in fact, not necessary. When it occurred, the stories served to enrich our interactions with individuals and the class.

At times students used telling metaphors to speak of their learning and themselves as learners. For example, two students spoke of their past and future courses of learning as a journey. For one the journey was by sea, and an impressive transformation had taken place: "It seems that I embarked on a journey at the beginning of the term and you were the captain. Now, I have reached the first port of call and will be switching to another ship for the rest of the journey. However, I am now the captain and the journey lasts a lifetime." There may be periods of "rough waters," but the ship will "sail safely on to a better understanding of the Bible." By contrast another student looking toward graduation said: "So as I travel down the school's road trying to reach destination graduation I find that the curves, bumps, drunk drivers, and traffic jams are working overtime trying to prevent me from making destination graduation as a true upright Christian." Each plots her or his life as a journey, but the sense of self-direction and control, as well as what that future holds, is strikingly different.

Another student who had come back to college to prepare for a basic career change spoke in her final story of her discovery of the need to maintain a balance in her learning. As she prepared to enter the nursing profession, she spoke in several ways and contexts of the need to balance relationships with self and others, and in

this her words moved from a selfless mode of caring and connection to modes that we might call "selffull." Early in her tape she seemed to lose herself in care for another, then to realize this, and to seek in her education a breadth that would allow care for herself even as she prepared to enter a profession that emphasized care of others. Balancing of "autonomy and independence" with care and fidelity and "dedication to the needs that surround me," came to be seen as an "on-going process." "I always feel I am balancing what I should be doing with what I want to be doing, and what I feel I should be doing with what I am doing, and that's the on-going process." The perceived need "to find a balance in life" led her to renewed attention to what she called "spirituality" and her "reflective nature." She came to realize that preparation for her new profession would now have to take place in a context that also allowed growth of herself.

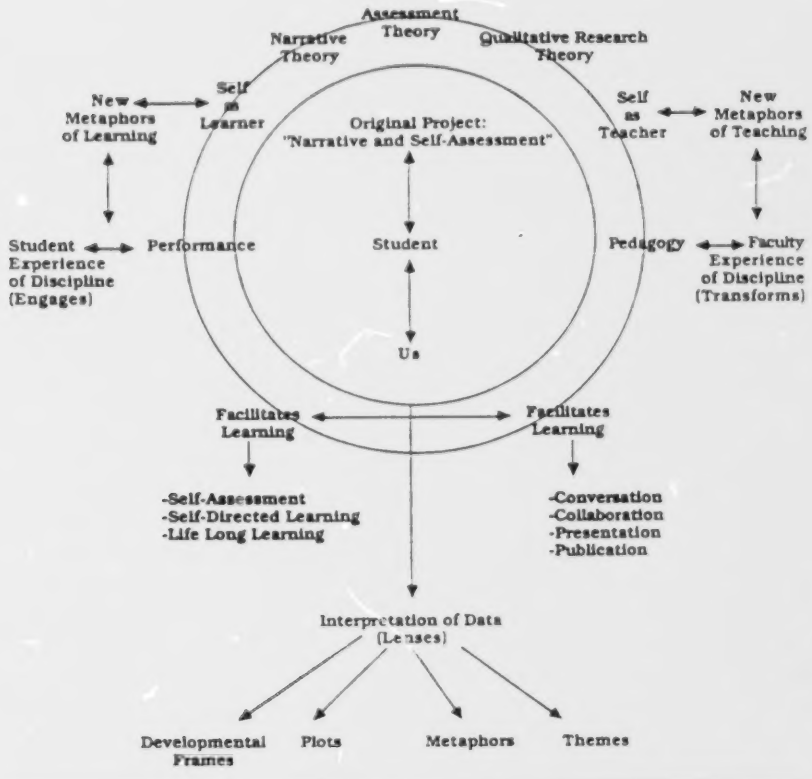
One student was especially attentive to her learning strategies for dealing with an assessment involving aesthetic response. "I enjoyed dealing with the painting; it's the sort of thing that's really fun for me, um . . . I loved looking at them. I don't know how much time I spent observing those paintings out of those books. I've seen pictures and slides of Picasso's "Guernica" before so I basically remembered a little bit about it. But truly you were right. The longer you spend just simply looking, taking it all in, the more you get out of it. I found the preparation was a lot of fun. The actual writing was tedious. There was so much to . . . . so many observations to put together that it was overwhelming at first to figure out the way to write them so someone else would understand. I actually decided to map out my plan, to organize my paper, so that at least gave me a beginning point, and at that point I was able to go. Before that I pretty much procrastinated with the writing. So once I started out with a kind of a chronological thing, I mean where I described myself and things that make me unique. Then I went on to describe the actual work and then pull the elements out that contribute to my response. That was logical. I hope it's readable for my instructor, because I wrote fifteen pages worth of STUFF!!" Moving from her own personally powerful experience of a painting, she was able to develop ways to respect her experience by communicating it to another.

Benefits for Teachers

As students came to reflect on and assess their learning strategies and themselves as learners, we found ourselves challenged to do the same as teachers. Figure Two indicates that this enriched understanding of "Self as Teacher" parallels the students' new awareness of "Self as Learner."

Just as we saw evidence of students' increased awareness of themselves articulated in various metaphors, our own metaphors of "Self as Teacher" became more figural as what they chose to tell us informed our image of self in the classroom, thereby shaping our pedagogy. Our experience of our disciplines was similarly influenced by what they said and we did. Being privy to and participants in a conversation about the disciplines they were studying,

Figure 2



their questions and conversation transformed the experience each of us had of our own discipline. Parallel experiences of recognition, definition, articulation, and transformation, enhanced our day to day experience of the teaching-learning experience, leaving us convinced of the importance of making room in our courses for students' voices, both for their benefit and our own as well.

Specific metaphors that became figural for us were those of "host" and "midwife." As a host, a metaphor suggested by one student in his story, one seeks to bring together those one respects and cherishes. The teacher as host seeks to bring together discipline/subject matter and students. Effective hosts will seek as fully as possible to understand each, and to shape contexts where they can come together in ways each can grow and be renewed. At times when especially successful in this the host can even join the party.

The teacher as midwife attends to and coaches the student in the act of learning. They work in tandem to bring forth an idea, deliver a response. It is the student who does the learning in cooperation with the midwife who mediates between the students and their experiences of discovery, inquiry, and ambiguity. Similarly, students' stories of learning help the midwife mediate between prior experience and what they experience in the course.

Within the field of each metaphor, the teacher is one who facilitates the active learning of others. This recasts in a very different light such basic classroom issues as management, authority, shape and use of space and time, assessment, and feedback. There is an integrity of praxis, a wholeness, when the various dimensions of classroom teaching are considered in a context that interrelates them.

It is within such extended metaphors that we re-viewed pedagogical options. Students playing back to us their experiences of learning made us very aware that our perceptions of their experiences were not always congruent with their experiences. For example, a student, as part of a formal assessment, gave what others perceived as a well prepared, substantive, and effectively delivered speech, and received very positive comments from other students and the course instructor. To all appearances she appeared pleased with her performance and seemed responsive to this feedback. Only her own account of the experience could reveal that when she began and saw "the two assessors begin to write" she "fell apart," and that she "went through tremendous trauma the rest of that day and most of the weekend in fact." This is a telling example because it provided the classroom teacher with information not available in any other way, making it possible to respond to the student in ways that would lead her to a more effective use of criteria.

Students' stories of past experiences with the subject matter of a course and of particular experiences in a course provide an enriched context for more constructive feedback that engages the individual's possibilities for growth. Asking new types of questions of the Bible, for example, asks some students to profoundly recast their understanding and experience of it as authority (or Authority) in their lives. An appreciation of the dynamics involved in this, of some of the difficulties faced, and of the personal stakes at issues makes possible feedback that respects who and where they are while encouraging potential change and growth. While the possibilities for feedback were enriched, grading became even more problematic. Students' stories of learning contextualize, accent the particular, and underscore the uniqueness of each individual. Attention to students' stories made all the more clear how grading systems tend to decontextualize what is context specific, generalizing multidimensional phenomena into unidimensional symbols that deny the particular.

In another instance student narratives affirmed the effectiveness of small group work. They indicated that keeping these groups fairly constant over the semester not only provided a working context for learning, but that they also evolved into informal support groups which gathered in various settings outside of class. Such groups created opportunities for substantive conversations and questions that enriched large group discussions. Within a history course, for example, students in these groups engaged in sustained conversation about the discipline as traditionally practiced and raised such questions about concepts central to the discipline and historical inquiry as "Who is missing?" As a result, students were able to do history, not simply learn about it, and do it in ways that were innovative. This challenged their prior experiences of the discipline, especially prior learning situations where they experienced history as a collection of uncontested answers that constitute "the Truth."

Conclusions

What began as a research project is now an integral part of our classroom practice. We regard the primary result to be the process outlined on pages 10–11 that allows students time and space in our courses to tell their stories as learners.

We found this process easily adapted to our courses, and believe it could be adapted to all courses as well as other contexts for learning such as internships, independent study, external and experiential learning. We also found student narratives enriched our and the students' understanding and appreciation for the many

aspects of self-assessment. Our primary focus was on our students and on the insights they would gain in telling their stories of their experiences of learning. Just making space for these stories in our courses legitimized thoughtful attention to their experiences. Many became aware of themselves as learners and of their particular modes and strategies of learning in ways that empowered them to make judgments about their effectiveness, change what they deemed appropriate, and set directions for the future. Our students' stories also challenged us to rethink our understandings of ourselves as teachers, to examine particular instructional strategies, and to respond to our students with greater attention to their particular individuality.

We began this report with an account of an invitation. We now invite colleagues to take up and adapt this process to their teaching. We close with some final words from our students, for the ultimate rewards of this attention to students' stories are the striking awakenings that at times result.

What Carolyn Heilbrun says of women's experience in *Writing a Woman's Life* would seem to reflect that of many students: "Women transform themselves only after an awakening. And that awakening is identifiable only in hindsight" (1988, p. 118). For example, one student telling of her experience in a particular class came to the following insight: "It never dawned on me before that there was such a lack in women's voices in history. Even when I was taking LA 282 and I read Anne Schaef's *Women's Reality*, I never felt that I was being torn apart by living and working within what she called 'the white male society' . . . . Now . . . . I can see that I was really a part of that system that *Women's Reality* mentioned, because I was not looking beyond what I was being told nor exploring more than I was asked to accept." Another student, in a different course, after listening to several others interpret familiar stories from quite new points of view, said of his own experience of new perceptions in his reading: "Now that I really think about it, the experience is probably a result of information that I turned into education."

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M_____(24 years old)

Initial Story

My experience with the Bible is one that is not uncommon, but it is difficult to grow up with and develop a need for the Bible. I grew up with two denominations in my family. Each had their own beliefs or interpretations of the Bible and both believed that they were correct.

I had to choose which church I was going to belong to, and of course I was going to make one party mad. I made a decision probably for the wrong reasons. I was baptized because all of my friends were doing it. I never fully realized what it was to read *and understand* the Bible and it's message. Of course I read it, but I didn't know what I was reading.

I went for years just taking what people told me the readings meant as the only interpretation. I came to college still with this belief that the only meaning in a passage was the one that had been passed down for centuries. I never believed that someone that is not in a place of authority could actually interpret the readings in the Bible.

I went with some friends—mainly because I had nothing else to do—to an interdenominational meeting. At this meeting I heard people ask questions that I had always taken the answers for granted. The people that answered the questions gave several different answers so that you could choose the one that best fit your life and beliefs.

After that I really got into reading the Bible and studying the messages in it for me and trying to apply these things to my life. I never knew that my opinion could be correct. Until this time I never realized that each person has to interpret the Bible for his or her own needs.

Now I truly believe that God lets you interpret the messages in the Bible to fit your own needs. I suppose that you can imagine the reaction that the members of my church had when I decided to state my opinion. They listened to me, then proceeded to explain to me why I was wrong. Of course this was extremely frustrating and taught me to just smile and agree with them.

To sum up my experience with the Bible, it would be easiest to say that until recently I haven't had any personal experience with the Bible. I just always listened to what everyone said it meant and believed that. Now I read it and search for a message in it that will apply directly to my life.

This experience has taught me that in order to learn from something you have to search in it to find what is in it to apply to

my life. I have also learned that I shouldn't be afraid to speak out for what I believe. In something of this nature no one is right and no one is wrong. I learned that each person reads the Bible to fit their own needs.

Experience of Exercises

1. The thing that amazed me the most was the fact that I actually stepped back and read it as a story—that it wasn't the Bible lesson to be studied in my faith. I was also very confused as far as how to go about the assignment. I started one way but when I got finished I realized that I should have done the last part first and the first part last but it was too late to re-do the assignment. On the next assignment I will know to take a good look at what I have to do and see which ways it will be best to go about completing the assignment. As the old saying goes, I won't jump in the swimming pool without first making sure there is water.

2. I started this exercise by characterizing Joseph by each event that happened to him. The one thing that stands out for me is that Joseph was not approached by God in any way. The narrator mentions on several occasions that the Lord is looking out for Joseph but there is never any mention of a calling like most of the other heroes have in the Bible.

I am curious as to how Joseph knew that God was with him all along. Did Joseph just act on instinct or was God really speaking to him?

3. This exercise was not difficult in finding the ironic passages, but I felt that it was difficult evaluating them. I think that if Esther and Mordecai had let it be know that they were Jews and related to each other, the entire story would have changed.

This is a very difficult passage to understand God's part in. Was he involved at all? What was the point of this book? It was a nice story and would probably make a good movie, but I see no religious text to it. Just the fact that two of the characters were Jews.

4. I found Milton to be very hard to understand. The interpretation he gave seemed to be written in a way that jumbled up the thoughts. I had to read it two or three times before I began to feel like I could understand enough to write my paper.

I do feel that Milton placed Samson in a new light and gave him feelings that Judges does not let you see. I believe it was Milton's format that had me confused.

Final Story

My experience with the Bible up until the time I entered college has been one of repeating the interpretations that others had

given me when I was younger. Individual interpretation had never been encouraged. We had always just been taught one interpretation and we were supposed to give that back when asked about that particular passage.

Since taking this course I have learned to interpret the Bible for myself. I feel encouraged to look deeper into the passage for a more complex meaning. I feel as if we have been encouraged to read between the lines. At first this was really hard to do because of early teachings of the Bible when we just repeated back what we had learned in Sunday School.

I always just assumed that everyone who went to Sunday School (any denomination) was taught these interpretations. I felt that anyone who tried to get people to see different meanings was an atheist. I suppose that again this goes back to the way I was raised.

I now realize that the Bible was put here for each one of us individually and there is a separate message for everyone. There is no sin in reading the bible and asking the question, "I wonder why that happened?" Or, "Did God really mean for them to do that?" If you don't ask questions or you don't dig in and see what deeper meaning you can find, then you are not really reading the Bible for yourself but are repeating what other people have told you before.

It is nice to have a class this size where there are a lot of differing opinions and no one is considered wrong. When someone says, "Well I see it this way . . ." that interpretation is looked at, commented on and never denied being looked at as correct. How can you consider someone's own opinion or interpretation incorrect? You may not agree with it but it would be extremely unfair to consider it wrong.

This class has brought out thoughts about several passages that are never really looked at in church or Sunday school. What teacher in Sunday school is going to talk about or discuss Abraham sending his wife to another man? After all this was just a form of prostitution—Abraham did get paid!

This class has carried over into other classes also. It has made me look into the reading with more open eyes. There is more to the readings than just words on a page. I actually get into the readings and try to get at the core of the actual meaning.

I am also more eager to speak up and ask questions especially if I do not understand what is being discussed—I am shy to an extent and it is hard to suddenly say I don't understand in front of thirty people who act as if they do understand. I have even stood up now and said that in latest readings on the subject there is contradiction to what you are saying.

The whole point to this class for me was to become a more aggressive reader—which I feel that I have and to have that carry over into other things besides the Biblical readings. Not only have I learned to look deeper in the readings, but I have begun to look deeper into all aspects of life—conversation, actions and people themselves.

Comparison with The Chosen

My story about my experience with the Bible this semester most closely compares to that of Reuven Malter. Reuven was encouraged to search for himself. He was given the traditional teachings but his father also encouraged Reuven to look into himself for meanings to apply to his own life.

Reuven was given more of a free rein in his education than Danny was given. Danny was expected to fulfill his father's place and he was being trained for this. Danny had no freedom as far as his studies were concerned, the traditional beliefs were the only interpretations for Danny. Danny had doubts and concerns but he could not express these to anyone but Reuven because of his (Danny's) position.

Like Reuven I feel that this semester I have been encouraged to look not only at the traditional interpretations but to also look for the meanings I see in a passage that apply to me. It is wonderful to know that we are in positions that we can interpret things for ourselves. We do not have to accept one point of view as Danny did with his father.

I see Reuven as the one more likely to become a rabbi because he was not forced into the position. He will give more to the religion because that is what he wants to do. He has been taught traditional laws but he has also been educated in other areas—such as literature, and history (other than Jewish history).

This semester I have felt encouraged to give my opinion on what I have read. I was never discouraged from my point of view, nor was I ever told that I was wrong. This type of encouragement is the same type of encouragement that I see Reuven's father giving him (Reuven). This is one of the most character building things that can be done and I saw Reuven's character developing as a result in *The Chosen*. I feel that I have had some improvements in my character as a result also.

Danny's character was hampered because of his father's discouragement. It is only after he is encouraged to do what he wants that his true character is seen.

It is possible to see bits and pieces of my story that do match Reuven and Danny's stories but I feel that it is most comparable to Reuven's story. It is a difficult task to stand up, for ones beliefs, against tradition.

R_____(40 years old)

Initial story

One magnificent learning experience I had when I was quite young, possibly around 4 years of age, and what I learned was to never ride a tricycle down a hill. I can remember one Sunday morning racing my sister. She had just gotten a new two-wheel bicycle. We were racing down a steep hill right next to our house and I was on a youth size tricycle. As I started down the hill, the very first thing that I realized not very far off the top of the hill, was the fact that I no longer had any control over the tricycle, that the faster I went the pedals spun faster and I couldn't get my feet on them to stop the tricycle. As I was going down the hill I remember a lot of things coming into my mind. First of all was the fear that I was going to get hurt, that the tricycle was going to tip over. As I got nearer the bottom of the hill, my fear was of the road that crossed in front of me, that I was going to get hit by a car. Once I made it across that, traveling at great speed, I realized that the only way I was going to stop, and I had no control over that, was to hit a tree, which I did. Then also I remember hanging from that tree, in my good Sunday dress, and my sister not knowing whether to laugh or to cry or to be concerned. Some old gentleman running down the hill was trying to stop the tricycle.

I remember, after getting myself detached from the tree, being so afraid of going home and telling anybody what had happened because I knew I was going to be yelled at for not having enough common sense to know not to ride my tricycle down that hill. Remembering that my father so often had told me that I was never to even be on a street on that tricycle, and here I had disobeyed him, and not listened to what he had told me. The adventure of the race wasn't worth it any longer. It wasn't. It was a very frightening thing. I also knew that when I got home I was going to probably be in a lot of trouble for the fact that my best Sunday dress was ripped. To me it was, it was such a learning experience. Often when I think of going ahead and doing something that I am unsure of, that experience pops into my head, as to whether it's something I know deep down inside that I shouldn't be doing, whether the thrill and excitement of the adventure is going to be worth the outcome.

Response to Social Interaction Assessment

I think that by being allowed to take the Social Interaction Assessment with the same group of people that I had been working with in my IN 125 class was really a great value to me. First of all,

I felt that I knew them on a personal level and I really felt all of them would work for the good of the group. Nobody would go in with the attitude of trying to beat somebody else out for the lead role. I also think that, ah, I knew each well enough to know what I could expect out of them. Really, they really gave me in group what I expected from them, and the few surprises that I got were good surprises. I think that we've gotten to a point where we know each other well enough that in a sense we could almost read each other's mind and know how we worked. Because of that, I think that the group ran very smoothly for the assessment and I really think that, ah, if we had gone in as strangers that we wouldn't have near the advantage in taking the assessment as we did. I think just the fact that all of us felt real comfortable and really felt we could rely on each other was really a contributing factor to the whole assessment.

Response to Valuing Assessment

Doing the valuing paper was a really hard thing for me to do. I was very, very relieved when I found out that I had done it the wrong way, and I really didn't have to go as person into the whole paper as what I thought I had to. It's not the first time that I've looked at my values and I've reevaluated them. When I first had children, I spent some time looking closely at my values and deciding which values were very very important to me and which I really wanted to instill in my children. Over the years I've been very much aware of my kids and their values and the things that their father and I do, and making sure that they see values that are important to me, so that they also grow up with those values. Doing this paper again made me reevaluate them, and I guess I am very happy for that, because it's been ten years probably since I sat down and really closely looked at them and things, and times have changed. Basically my values are holding pretty strong and I, ah, I can honestly say that not too many things as I reevaluated them have, not too many of my ideas as far as my values have gone, have changed. I just find that it's something important to me that I do reevaluate them once in a while. So this was, was very, you know, actually a very good experience for me, and it really did work out quite well that I had this opportunity to look at things and reevaluate my values, at least from my children's stand point, or my children's values or my children's benefit, I guess is the word that I am looking for. So, ah, that's probably what I got out of this assignment.

Final Story

In this entry I'm suppose to tell you a story about the person on the tape you've been listening to. Ah, I tell you I, I guess I'm a lot like, still, like the person that, ah, you heard about on the very first entry on the tape. I, I'm sort of a . . . a person that does a lot of things quickly without putting much thought behind what I do. I worry about the consequence to a certain extent later. Ah, I'm a person that has always gotten bored quite easily and saw myself trying new things just to see what it would be like to do it. I wasn't content with growing up and living in a small town, so as soon as I graduated from high school I moved away to a bigger city. When I got bored with that I got in my car and moved to a different state and found myself an apartment. It didn't bother me whether I had anybody else to lean on or not. To this day I don't feel the need to have people to lean on. So as far as the person that you hear on this tape, I'm still very much like that. I, I have never, never really changed.

When I came to Alverno, I, there again it was something that I, I really wanted to do for a long time. I wasn't afraid of starting school. I guess I always felt that I could do it, that I would be good. I knew I would be good at teaching. I have always known I would be good at teaching. It was a matter of just coming back and getting that four-year degree so I could really step into that classroom and say. "I am a teacher now, give me some respect." Since I have entered school there have been a lot of things that have really scared me. A lot of new learning experiences, and tests, and I mean validations, are very scary for me. But I really never felt like I have let that fear hold me back. I always take a little time to think about it, but I get myself by the boot strings and pull myself up and decide that I'm going to do it. I'm going to try, and whether I'm successful or not sometimes is not the important part, it's the fact that I have gathered up the courage to go ahead and do whatever it is I have set out to do. So, I guess it's, you know, as I've gone through these classes now this semester, I felt like I have gained and I have grown a lot. I certainly have a long ways to go, and I'm certainly kind of a hit-and-miss person yet. I haven't really developed the skill to. . . any of my skills to a fine art yet, but it will come, because I'm determined to make it happen. Whenever I set my mind to doing anything, I do it.

Responses to Educating Rita

While watching the film, *Educating Rita*, I think that there were a lot of things in that film that, that, related to myself. Rita and I were both after basically the same thing. She was after being

accepted into a higher class than what she was. She wanted more for herself than what she felt she was getting at that point. I, too, that was a lot to do with my decision to go back to school. I was, had always been, in education. I have always been an educator. I have always enjoyed teaching, but I always felt less than other people because I could only say I have the Associate Degree. I have a two-year degree in early childhood, not a four-year degree. I never felt like I was really quite as, as good as anybody, as everybody else was, because I just didn't have that four year degree.

So what Rita and I were doing, both of us are doing, was going back to school because we wanted to be better than what we were. And that's not a bad thing. Rita and I are also alike because we were both excited learners. We were really thrilled with the things that we were doing every day and started finding a lot of pride in the fact that we could do it even though we hadn't, . . . had been away from it for a long time or had never had the opportunity to do it before. We were able to do it. We were able to learn and to grow, and we were excited about what we were doing. We started evolving as women, started changing, started growing. Some times, maybe, ah, we grew too fast. We got too excited. Maybe made people just a little sick of us, hearing us talk about school and all the wonderful things that we were learning. I, Rita and I, are hopefully a lot like that.

Where we differ though is that ah, I think Rita started to, ah, give up a lot of her innocence when she went back to school. And it wasn't, you know, she, she started losing things. She started, ah, becoming detached from her family and from her husband, which wasn't really totally her fault. I mean, she started to grow, and she liked what she was seeing and she liked what she was doing and . . . but yet she was leaving everybody else behind. She was strong enough to be going to school because it was something she wanted, but yet she wasn't strong enough to be able to come out and just say it to her husband: "You know, I'm not, I'm not ready for children. I don't want to have children. I am going to have a degree." She sort of, she deceived him to a certain, you know, in that respect.

I think that's where Rita and I differ. I, I feel like I'm a strong enough person that, ah, I know that, I'm excited about what's happening. I know that I'm changing, my family certainly knows that I'm changing, yet I'm strong enough to be honest about things. If anything, maybe going to school had made me a little more brave, a little more honest with my family, a little more out-spoken. It doesn't mean that everything has been easier since I have gone back to school, but I think that as time has passed now that I'm be-

ing accepted for the changes that I have made. So maybe in a certain respect. . . maybe I'm fortunate for that.

So anyhow, I guess in conclusion, all I can say is that I do see a lot of similarities between Rita and myself. Rita was determined to change and to get an education. I'm determined to get an education. I'm determined that when that day comes for my big exam, I'll pass it because I'll be ready. And ah, I think that Rita, watching Rita, sort of gave me a chance to reflect and maybe see some things in her that were maybe taking place in myself that, that I wasn't real happy with, and so I think that *Educating Rita* actually has probably been a wonderful thing for me to be able to experience.

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